

***Chocolat*: Transcript**

Introduction

One of French cinema's most exciting, unique and unpredictable filmmakers – Claire Denis – made her remarkably assured directorial debut with *Chocolat* in 1988. A story of simmering tensions at the point of boiling over, the bulk of the film's narrative takes place during the twilight years of French colonial rule in Africa; in Cameroon in the late 1950s.

Most of the film's story is told in flashback, with the flashback bookended by a frame narrative set in the present day in which the main protagonist, the aptly named France, returns as an adult to the country where she grew up – Cameroon. The daughter of a French colonial official and his wife, France's return to post-independence for Cameroon triggers memories of her childhood there, and in particular memories of her relationship with the family's black servant, Protée.

At its heart *Chocolat* is an exploration of the complex relationships between coloniser and colonised, and the human damage exacted on both sides of this power structure. In this presentation I'm going to explore how Denis articulates this idea in her film through a close analysis of several key scenes. Firstly though, a brief word on the historical context of the film's story and setting is necessary.

Historical Background - European Colonialism in Africa

Colonialism is the practice of one nation or people exercising dominion over another, occupying their land and exploiting the resources there for their own economic gain. The transatlantic slave trade that spanned the period from the 16th to the 19th century initially drew European interests to Africa, and in the late 19th century European powers began a ‘Scramble for Africa’, invading, occupying, colonising and annexing the continent. By 1914, ninety percent of Africa was under European rule.

Towards the end of 19th century France, Great Britain and Germany struggled for control of Cameroon, a country located on the west coast of Central Africa. Cameroon was a German protectorate from 1884 until Germany lost the First World War in 1918. Then, in 1919, France and Britain divided Cameroon between them, forming two separate colonies.

At the end of World War Two, France and Britain promised to grant Cameroon self-government, with French Cameroon finally achieving independence in 1960. The two colonies, English and French, were unified in 1961, creating the modern state of Cameroon. English and French are still the country’s official languages, though there is a considerable amount of linguistic diversity within the country.

As with other films whose stories play out within the context of specific real world circumstances, a knowledge of this historical background helps us to understand better and interpret the events and actions in *Chocolat*, a film in which characters’ actions, motivations, gestures and dialogue can occasionally seem somewhat enigmatic and ambiguous. The main events in *Chocolat* then, take place towards the

tail end of this period of French dominion over Cameroon, and in the film Denis shows the cracks beginning to form in this precariously balanced situation, as France's father Marc says, 'One of these days, we'll be driven out of here.'

Claire Denis

It is worth saying a word or two now about the director herself. Of particular interest to us here is the close relationship between Denis's personal history and the story of *Chocolat*. The film could in many ways be thought of as an autobiographical piece, albeit one with the addition of elements and inspiration drawn from other sources too.

Denis, like France, grew up in Cameroon and various other French colonies in Africa at around the same time period as the one depicted in the film. Denis's father was also a colonial official, though she describes him as someone who, in spite of being part of the status quo, believed in independence and who 'asked questions about why we were there.' Around this time international attitudes were changing and the legitimacy of colonial rule was forcefully questioned. This ambiguity in the nature of Denis' family as white colonisers but with apparently progressive attitudes, and the questioning, critical eye that this must have fostered is evident in *Chocolat*.

Furthermore, France's apparent desire – but inability – to reconnect with the country where she was raised - as it was never really hers to begin with - finds its reflection in Denis's own experiences. She has said: 'My father was a colonial functionary, so I knew I was passing through, I didn't lose my country, because I knew it never belonged to me. Nothing belonged to us...'. This sense of rootlessness and of not

belonging is acutely felt in the scenes in which we see the adult France too. There is a sense of melancholy to these scenes that one could attribute to an inability of hers to find any real meaning in the trip.

The other major influence on the film, alongside Denis's personal history, was a book entitled *Une vie de boy* by Ferdinand Oyono. The book tells the story of a young Cameroonian man who becomes a household servant, or boy, and begins to question the legitimacy of the white colonials, realising that their power is completely arbitrary. Denis has described the film as 'a bit like the memory of that book.'

The film received criticism from some quarters for ultimately being a white, Eurocentric view of colonial encounters, and for her part Denis responded to this criticism by remarking that yes it is indeed 'essentially a white view of the other'. However, whilst it is a story that is told primarily from the coloniser's perspective, it critiques the colonial encounter through the behaviour of its characters, many of whom are broad stereotypes of the kind of people who would have been present in the colonial project. I will talk more about these colonial stereotypes shortly, as they serve as a catalyst for Denis to further interrogate the relationships that existed between whites and blacks under colonial rule.

Identity, Race, Perspective and Point of View in *Chocolat*

Whilst the majority of the film takes place in the 1950s, the film begins in present day Cameroon, where a young white woman sits quietly on a beach observing a black man and his young son playing in the sea.

We cut from this medium shot of France to a close up of the boy lying on the shore, his hands behind his head, his eyes closed, as the waves gently wash over him.

It's something of a jarring cut, following on logically from the previous shot we might perhaps expect to see another from France's point-of-view, but this new shot, composed as it is in tight close-up and from above, clearly isn't from her perspective. Denis disrupts our sense of the orientation of the scene and shifts perspective away from the white woman sat on the beach, to the black boy relaxing in the surf.

This interest in point-of-view and perspective, and in looking is a theme that will recur in *Chocolat* and indeed throughout Denis's subsequent work. The focus on, and foregrounding of, the body that is present in these shots too: the water lapping over the boy's outstretched palm and through his fingers, France brushing the sand from her toes, is another defining characteristic of Denis's cinema.

In the next scene France hitches a ride with the man and his son.

"Are you a tourist?" the man asks her.

Through just a few lines of dialogue this scene tells us a great deal about the kinds of ideas that the film will explore. Though at first the significance of this exchange is unclear, such lines and France's expression, which is at once both inscrutable and heavy with meaning, take on an added resonance on a second viewing. France of course is no simple tourist. Her relationship to the country is much more complicated and fraught than that, and as we later learn, the man's national identity is also less straightforward than we might at first assume.

Point-of-view and identity becomes entwined with the notion of memory in *Chocolat* when we consider that, although the flashback to France's childhood forms the core of the film's narrative and she is the central figure within the story, it remains ambiguous to what extent the events in the film are seen entirely from her perspective. She appears in most, but not all of the scenes in the flashback section of the film. So the question remains - to what extent is what we see in the film 'the truth' and to what extent are events refracted through France's memory? Whose story is this we might ask? For instance, France is not present during the scene in which Protée rejects Aimée's advances, could this be something that France imagined happening or that she was told about later?

Colonial Stereotypes

The characters who arrive after a plane is forced to undertake an emergency landing near the remote outpost where France and her family live include an overtly racist, rude and obnoxious coffee planter who brings food to his black mistress / servant with the words, 'your ration of oats my filly', a newly arrived administrator and his young wife who refuses to be treated by a black doctor and Luc, one of the film's more complicated characters. Of course, whilst Marc and Aimée may appear more benevolent in their treatment of Protée and the other black characters in the film compared to these caricatures, they are still agents of colonial rule. The arrival of these colonial stereotypes thus serves to highlight and draw attention to the hypocrisy of the whole enterprise, including the hypocrisy of France's family.

Luc is a white former seminary student who outwardly professes to identify with the black servants and workers. He arrives with the blacks who turn up to dig out the new runway that is required for the plane's eventual departure, though he soon grows tired of this work and is more than happy to accept Marc's invitation to sleep in the house with them. Luc acts as a catalyst in the film, both in the sense of disrupting the status quo and bringing about the drama that takes place in the film's third act and also in the sense that through him Denis is able to further explore the kinds of themes that she is interested in. He is a provocateur who goads the other characters and lampoons their racist attitudes, he clearly considers himself something of a radical, though his treatment and humiliation of Protée appears just as malicious as any other overt manifestations of racism within the film. It is also his action in identifying and naming aloud Aimée's clear attraction to Protée that leads to the scene in which Aimée reaches out and touches Protée's calf, perhaps in an attempt at sexual contact, or simply out of a desire for connection, only to be forcefully refused by Protée.

Final Thoughts

Chocolat is a rich, enigmatic and challenging film that rewards multiple viewings. With remarkable acuity, poetry and beauty it interrogates, in a very personal, intimate way, a particular period in French history. It does not deal with major historical events and the actions of important personalities but with the interactions and exchanges of ordinary people. Since *Chocolat*, Denis has continued to explore characters in her films whose lives have been shaped by the legacy of colonialism.

She continues to make films that touch on issues of sexuality, gender, identity, race, power, desire and memory. Already in her first film, we find these themes not only present, but fully developed and interrogated with a clarity that alludes to even some of the most talented of filmmakers working today.